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MOHAMMED THE CONQUEROR¹

THE personality of Mohammed the Conqueror has for the most part been represented by western European writers in two sharply contrasted ways : he has been characterised either as a monster of unbounded lust, bizarre cruelty, shameless perfidy, diabolical ambition, and vengeful hatred of the Cross; or as a vigorous man under rigid self-control, an exacting but magnanimous chief, a just judge, a wide-visioned empire-builder, and in religious matters one of the most tolerant rulers of mankind. At the outset let it be said that the second portrait is far nearer the truth than the first. At the same time, like most human beings, the Conqueror possessed a variety of qualities, some of which were mutually inconsistent. The exact truth about him is not easily to be determined. Even among his contemporaries the contrast of estimates began. His enemies by race, language, loyalty and faith are certainly not to be trusted when they repeat about him scandalous tales, but they also frequently bear witness to his noble traits. His friends, moreover, did not always admire him for precisely those qualities which the changed values of our time esteem most worthy.

Some examples of differing estimates may be given. Knolles (a contemporary of Queen Elizabeth, but the author of the fullest history of the Turks in English) said : " In his love was no assurance, and his least displeasure was death : so that he lived feared of all men, and died lamented of none." But Count Wackerbarth, writing two centuries later, after calling Mohammed II " a very great extraordinary commander, an unexampled conqueror, the outstanding hero among the valiant Ottomans, one of the universally renowned princes among the vigorous Turks," says that " the success of his actions, the goodwill of his regulations, and the memory of his astonishing achievements can never be lost for his successors, nor indeed for the whole civilised and uncivilised world."

A clear contrast of false and true as regards this mighty man appears in the accounts of the death of his son Mustafa in the year 1474. Certain writers, including Knolles, and Arthur Thomas, wrote astonishingly that Mustafa offended his father by violating the wife of the trusted officer Ishak Beg, and that in punishment Mohammed had him slain.

¹ Based on an address delivered in the Slavonic Section of the Anglo-American Historical Conference, at the University of London, July 1936.

The truth about the death of Mustafa is revealed in the words of the eyewitness Angiolello, an Italian youth who was servant to the young prince.² Mustafa, as governor of Caramania, was successfully reducing the outlying districts to obedience when he fell ill. Accompanied by his army, a miniature of that of his father, he travelled as a stricken man from Nigde toward Konia, where resided his mother, wife and daughter. He was expecting the arrival of the sultan's own physician, an Italian, Master James of Gaeta. Mustafa had his tent pitched near the little town of Buru; he went to the public bath for the customary exercises, then returned to his tent, lay down, and received some food; but his fever grew worse, and at midnight he died. The sorrowing attendants carried his body to Konia, and caused it to be embalmed. Messengers rode forth bearing the tidings to the Sultan his father.

Says Angiolello: "When the courier who bore the news to Istanbul (arrived there), all feared to tell the Great Turk, except one, whose name was Hajji Sima, he who was like a preceptor, and who frequently read aloud to the Great Turk; this man dressed in sackcloth with a black girdle, and went into his presence. When the Turk saw him, he understood without asking, and descended from the sofa on which he was sitting; he lifted the carpets which were spread on the ground; he stood on the pavement and wept and lamented for his son; and gathered the dust from the fissures of the pavement and put this dust on his head in sign of great grief, and beat with his palms his face and then his chest, and wrung his hands and uttered great groans; and in this way he continued three days and three nights."

Mohammed then sent word that the body of his son should be brought to Brusa, to be buried there with much ceremony. He gave orders that the young man's mother was to live there. The daughter of Mustafa who, Angiolello says, was named Nerzisdad, was brought to Constantinople, and given in marriage to her cousin, the eldest son of Prince Bayazid, to whom, now Heir Apparent, was assigned the government of Amasia. The remaining women of Mustafa's household were given in marriage to officers of the court; and Mustafa's manservants, among them Angiolello, were placed in the Sultan's own household according to their capacities. The fatally destined Prince Jem, now second in line for the throne, was transferred from Amasia to the place left vacant by Mustafa's death in the government of Konia.

² As found in Donado da Lezze, *Historia Turchesca* (L. Ursu, editor), Bucarest, 1910, pp. 64-70.

So much by way of coming as close to the heart of Mohammed as is possible, after the lapse of 450 years, and after all the changes that the world has known. The episode, wholly devoid of scandal, reveals the middle-aged Mohammed as in sovereign control of the powerful governmental institution which he had helped to create, and which ruled the Ottoman empire; but also as a lonely and sorrowing man, the affectionate and considerate head of a very human family. To comprehend him more fully, the discussion may now go back to the beginning of his life.

Mohammed, or Mehmet as the Turks usually call him, was born, it seems, early in 1430. His father was Sultan Murad II, high-minded and peace-loving, but bound by inheritance to the great machine of war and government which he conducted well and improved greatly. Mohammed's mother remains unknown. According to varying accounts she was either a Serbian princess, or a slave, or a proud lady from an important Turkish family in Anatolia. It may be assumed that she alone guided him to seven years of age, after which his father provided preceptors to begin teaching him the Arabic and Persian languages, the Mohammedan religion and laws, and manly and martial accomplishments. Tradition has it that for some time he was unruly and refused to learn, until he came into contact with Mollah Kurani; this educator made vigorous use of the rod, and by this and other means converted the young prince into an earnest and brilliant student. Mingling for some years with his brothers and with hostage princes and selected pages, he would naturally have learned to speak Turkish, colloquial Greek, and Slavonic; but the tradition that he also read Latin and classical Greek does not fit the probabilities. When Mohammed was about 11 years of age, the death of his elder brother Aladdin made him immediate, and at the time, it seems, sole heir to the throne. Not long afterward he was probably assigned to a nominal governorship, with the presence of his mother and the guidance of trusted councillors.

The campaign of John Hunyady, in the winter of 1443, disastrous to the Turks and ending in a ten years' peace, left Sultan Murad very weary after 22 years of unceasing governing and fighting. He formed a plan of withdrawing to a life of leisure, literature and learning in his quiet, lovely seat at Manissa. He declared the 14-year-old Mohammed to be Sultan, and left him, with the aid of the most experienced advisers and soldiers, to conduct the state.

Had there been indeed a ten years' truce, Murad's plans might have succeeded. Mohammed might have learned gradually to

exert the authority of his exalted post. But the faithlessness of Christendom led to a crusade which threatened the Ottoman power with destruction. Murad was warned, returned in haste, and commanded successfully at Varna in November, 1444. Then he promptly returned the leadership to his son and retired again to Manissa.

The youth Mohammed endeavoured to do his duty. Averse to wine, not much interested in women, somewhat devoted to song, the principal charge brought against him by his greybearded councillors was that of being too fond of the chase. But military perils gathered; in 1446 a great fire destroyed much of Adrianople; and the Janissaries—the regular infantry—got out of hand. Prudent Khalil, of the Chendereli family, Grand Vizier almost by hereditary right, sent word to Murad that his return was necessary. Finally abandoning his dream of dignified leisure, Murad, only about 45 years of age, again grasped the helm of the state.

In these unparalleled circumstances, the behaviour of the youth Mohammed was exemplary. Whether ordered to the supreme command, to a quiet life in Manissa, or to a military post under his father before Kroja or on the famed “Field of Blackbirds” at Kosovo, he was always dutiful. In these years he became a superb horseman, a campaigner without fatigue, an impetuous commander, something of a scholar, certainly a lover of historical biography, a polished courtier, a keen diplomat, and a shrewd statesman. According to tradition he early reached the firm conclusion that the future of Ottoman Turkey demanded the capture of Constantinople, pitiful remnant of a vast old empire, lying unconquered at the centre of the Turkish dominion.

In the autumn of 1450, after one of many Albanian campaigns, with Europe and Asia apparently quiet, Murad celebrated with unprecedented splendour the marriage of Mohammed with a Turkish princess, perhaps a cousin on his mother's side. The young man retired once more to quiet Manissa. But in February, 1451, he was recalled to Adrianople by news of his father's unexpected death.

Now at 21 years of age the power of government was irrevocably his. Mature and experienced beyond his years, he took hold firmly. The oft-rebelling Caramania rose again, only to be surprised. Having quickly adjusted relations with neighbouring powers, Mohammed set off on his first independent campaign, which was not much more than a rapid ride in Anatolia, so promptly did Caramania subside. Returning after some 90 days to Adrianople, he deposed the too lenient Agha, or General, of the Janissaries. He then

proceeded to lay the foundations of a palace, or new portion of a palace, on an island in the Tunja river at Adrianople. Thus in his first few months of genuine power he proved his fitness for war, government, and princely construction.

The story of his building the castle of Rumeli Hissar in 1452 and of his capture of Constantinople after the 59 days' siege of 1453, does not need retelling. Considering the disproportionate forces of attack and defence, the capture was hardly a military feat of the first order. Noteworthy, however, is the engineering originality of the young Sultan in creating and transporting great cannon for battering down the massive old walls, and in moving galleys overland into the Golden Horn. Beginning from this victory, the Turks aspired to become a naval power.

But historically, to contemporaries and ever since, the taking of Constantinople was a major event, reverberating through the world. Nor did it seem a small matter to the Conqueror himself. He held that thus he had risen from the position of King to that of Emperor. Therefore the dignified but crude ceremonies of the camp were to be greatly extended into the splendours of a palatial court. In this the system of the Eastern Roman Empire could serve only partially as a model, because of its poverty and decay, and because in Turkish court ceremonies women had no place. Mohammed furthermore counted himself territorially the successor of the Cæsars. He visualised the extension of Turkish power not only over all Anatolia and the Balkan peninsula, but over Italy and Rome itself. He thought especially to revivify and restore the second Rome, Constantinople, as a populous, rich, and splendid city, inferior to no other capital of the world.

Mohammed entered promptly upon the proud but disastrous path of exalting himself and his male descendants into an order of being far superior to the rest of mankind. Not all contemporary authorities agree that he slew a young brother in the cradle, in order to remove a possible rival from the path of himself and his sons; but he is reputed to have been the author of a *Kanun-nameh* or law enjoining such a practice upon his successors. Without any question he promptly ordered the bowstringing of Khalil, the Grand Vizier, the first of that high position to suffer the death penalty. The ostensible reason was Khalil's treachery in showing favour to the defeated Greeks; rumour had it that the young Sultan bore a grudge because of his having been deposed in 1446 by Khalil's advice; sufficient, however, may be the reflection that Mohammed would tolerate no hereditary Mayor of the Palace. At the time of

his accession four or five great families had been accustomed to provide the incumbents of great offices. A century later these had all disappeared from power. Correlative with this discouragement of inherited authority, other than that of his own House, is the enlargement, improvement, and establishment in fixed places of the Palace Schools, in which youth selected from Christian captives and Christian subjects were trained rigorously to become officers of camp and government.

During all their time of power the great Ottoman Sultans gave constant attention to the living, growing, changing institution of rule and government. It may be called a machine, a court, a government, a state, but it was not exactly any one of these. I have elsewhere discussed it at some length as it existed in the time of Mohammed's great-grandson Suleiman. For Mohammed himself the chief problems were of personnel, employment, and improvement. Personnel included recruitment of officials at the beginning of their careers and their retirement at the end; between these points the success of the entire Ottoman enterprise depended upon having the right men in the right places; this demanded the wisest possible use of reward, punishment, and promotion. The employment of the machine involved a necessity of war to keep its component parts supple and active; in Mohammed's time the environing states and peoples provided abundant incitements toward and opportunities for war. Legislation and administration also presented increasing demands. Improvement of the machine was not only possible, but distinctly actual throughout Mohammed's reign. One of his last changes was to divide the office of Kaziasker or judge of the army into two, as earlier the territorial army itself had been divided into two under the command of Beylerbeys, one for Europe and one for Asia. The task of controlling the machine could be done well only by an exceptionally able man: untiring, alert, and just; shrewd, diligent, and dependable; and above all highly intelligent.

The mention of Mohammed's sense of justice brings up naturally the charge against him of extreme cruelty, and the more or less associated charge of extraordinary sensuality. Remember in the first place that while he was a great fountainhead of reward and punishment, no human authority existed which could restrain or punish him; the reader may imagine how he himself would behave, if placed completely above the law as was Mohammed the Conqueror—or Catherine the Great of Russia. But the whole trend of the evidence indicates that Mohammed, brought up from infancy as a prince, taught by wise preceptors the inward restraints of the

Moslem religion, kept in singularly close relations to a royal father of the noblest character, and proud beyond expression of the Ottoman achievement and promise—the evidence is that he was cruel only as he believed Allah, the Divine Being, God, to be cruel. His God was severe, a punisher of evil-doers, criminals and traitors, including as a matter of course among the latter all who might be disobedient, all opponents of His will, all who might stand in the way of the coming of His kingdom. The anecdotes which make Mohammed go beyond his model in deeds of cruelty are all, I believe, devoid of anything which resembles proof: such as that he ordered 24 pages to be cut open in order to ascertain which one had eaten stolen cucumbers, or that he had a slave decapitated to show that Gentile Bellini had not portrayed correctly the severed head of John the Baptist, or that with his own hand he struck off the head of the beautiful and beloved Irene, in order to prove to his assembled captains that he was not a man who would put love above duty. When moreover Greek writers affirm that he slew a young woman or a young man of noble Greek race, because of refusal to yield to his sensual desires, the propagandist animus is so prominent that in this present open-eyed time the story can have no credence. Again, one should not forget that the West, which on the whole is hardly in a position to throw stones, has always been inclined to believe that the harem of an eastern monarch is a centre of irregular promiscuity; when actually it is a multiple home, rigidly regulated, where the wives and children of the monarch are taken care of, entertained and educated, with the primary aim of maintaining the royal line. Likewise certain mistaken outsiders have interpreted the palace schools of the Sultans as harems (using the word in the same perverted sense) of boys; when actually they were well-ordered schools, under the sternest discipline and training, intended to provide a great and expanding power with generals, admirals, and statesmen.

Mohammed chose two large areas in the scantily inhabited city, one immediately after the capture and one five or six years later, to be the sites of palaces: the first for the women of his household and his young children, and the other for the business of state and the palace school. The first palace has disappeared, but the second, after much destruction and replacement, is still much as he planned it. Aya Sofia he took over as a principal house of Moslem worship. On the site of the Church of the Holy Apostles, ruined by time and earthquake, he built a mosque of his own. Earthquake again prevailed, and 200 years ago the building had to be replaced.

The cluster of ancillary buildings, the schools and libraries, kitchens and dormitories for students and strangers, and hospitals for the sick and the insane, has proved to be more durable than the main structure; most of them are standing, though used for changed purposes. At the supposed burial-place of Eyub, companion of the Prophet Mohammed, the Sultan erected a mosque, a part of which still stands. Mohammed gave some attention to the repair of existing buildings and of the city walls. But the place where his mighty cannon had reduced the walls to a ridge of stones was left unrestored.³

Constantinople had been declining in population for centuries, especially since the two destructive captures of the Fourth Crusade. On the eve of the siege it probably contained far fewer than 100,000 inhabitants. Of these not more than four or five thousand are believed to have perished. Some thousands were held to ransom or made slaves. But not many of them can have been carried away. The Conqueror was greatly concerned throughout his reign with repopulating the city. Not content with attracting the return of former inhabitants, and with encouraging the settlement of Turks, he brought in with more or less compulsion groups from many parts of his empire, especially from new conquests. A greatly increased population had been assembled by the end of his reign.

The centre of Mohammed's empire was thus made secure. How many great capitals in history have in any period of 465 years never once admitted a foreign victor? Perhaps only Rome, Kyoto, and London, besides Istanbul.

Mohammed's army was perhaps the best organised, the most flexible, and the most devoted and obedient of all the armies in the world of that day. Perhaps also in all these respects it was superior to the Turkish army at any previous or subsequent time. Its sturdy and invincible core was his personal army, containing some 10,000 Janissaries or regular infantry, and a similar number of Spahis of the Porte or household cavalry. Other elements which could either be assembled or be used separately were the feudal cavalry of Anatolia, the feudal cavalry of Rumelia, and the Akinji or irregular cavalry, a terrible body of advance guards or raiders. For the great campaigns the Azabs, or municipal and volunteer infantry, were also to be added. Contemporary estimates give him a maximum strength of 150,000 or more. Probably the most numerous force

³ Recently the loose stones have been cleared away and utilised in the foundation of a road, leaving standing the remaining portions of the shattered walls.

that he ever actually assembled was of about 80,000 for the campaign against Uzun Hassan in 1473. Two years later he was able to send a substantial army across the Black Sea in his own ships. In 1479 his general and admiral Gedik Ahmed landed a large expeditionary army in southern Italy.

But the times and the Turks were not adapted to such a conquering career—and complete collapse—as that of Timur before the time of Mohammed II, or Napoleon I later. His people were only in part nomadic, and therefore could not, like Timur, live entirely upon herds of animals. Nor did they move in rich and thickly-settled regions where, like Napoleon, they could live indefinitely off the country. The great army could be held together for a summer's campaign, but hardly longer. The cavalry subdivisions could sally forth on raids that were lucrative but also brief. Nor were the enemies of the Turks to be despised. Turkomans, Caramanians, and Persians of Asia could stand and give battle fiercely. Greeks, Serbs, Vlachs, and Bosnians, and particularly Hungarians and Albanians, under John Hunyady and Scanderbeg, could break up raids, sustain sieges, and advance in pitched battles. Mohammed did not suffer as many severe defeats as his enemies reported, but he or his generals were beaten on various occasions in Eastern Asia Minor, Wallachia, and Serbia. He failed at first to take Kroja and Jajce, and failed completely before Belgrade and Rhodes, which held out until the campaigns, 40 years after his death, of his great-grandson Suleiman. One of his most noteworthy characteristics was that, like the English people on many occasions, he obtained from defeat not discouragement, but only a more dogged resolution to win.

Nevertheless, the military success of Mohammed II, in addition to the capture of Constantinople, is not to be belittled. One does not need to agree fully with the traditional summary, that he took two empires, 12 kingdoms, and 400 cities. But the assured dominions of the star and crescent were much increased between his accession and his death. It is true that in many of his conquests his work was in lands previously subordinated, where he proceeded to extinguish a degree of local autonomy which he found troublesome and to replace it by direct administration. But he added: Trebizond, Caramania, and the lands between; Euboea, the Peloponnesus, Albania, and Croatia; Crimea, Lesbos, and Mitylene. In general, he left the Turkish power supreme in Asia Minor, and in the Balkan and Crimean peninsulas. In addition, he suggested the programme of his conquering successors, Selim I and Suleiman II,

for he threatened Persia, Egypt, Hungary, and Roumania. His design toward Italy did not appeal to his successors; never again did the Akinji raid as far as the Isonzo, nor did a Turkish army ever again lie two years in Otranto or any other Italian city. Secretive in his intentions, he left as a riddle without answer the destination of his campaign of 1481. But doubt can hardly exist that had he survived and enjoyed good health and average good fortune, he would in, say, 1484 or 1487 have transported the complete Turkish army to his bridgehead at Otranto, whence he might have reached Rome with little effective opposition. Hunyady, Scanderbeg, and Uzun Hassan were dead. Not yet were French, Spanish, or Austro-German armies ready to enter Italy in force. Turkish horses might indeed have been stabled, if not in St. Peter's, at any rate in the Eternal City.

Space is not now available for discussing at any length the influence of Mohammed II as a promoter and patron of trade and commerce, of useful and fine arts, and of culture and civilisation in general. In all these respects he was interested and active. But the times were less propitious in such directions than in military and governmental advances. The Byzantine civilisation had reached a low ebb through successive terrible shocks. The Turks were separated from the past of the lands in which they dwelt by the heavy curtains of differing language and religion, both of which were absent in contemporary Italy, where the Latin and Greek Revivals were well advanced. A slender bond between Mohammed and the personalities of the Italian Renaissance was created by the visit of Gentile Bellini. The Arabo-Persian culture had a more direct appeal to the youthful Ottoman Turkish people, through the tradition of seven centuries, embedded in education, law, religion, literature, and art. This outlook upon life made less appeal to Mohammed than to his successors down to Abdul Hamid II.⁴ The genuine old Turkish tradition was far away in space and time, and had for the most part to await the 20th century for adequate recognition and cultivation.

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⁴ But the books which remain from his personal library are apparently all in Arabic, Persian and Turkish.